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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000280

SIPDIS

RABAT FOR LEGAL ATTACHE

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SUBJECT: ELECTORAL TENSIONS IN TARKINT: WHERE AQIM, ARAB
MILITIAS, AND TUAREGS MEET

REF: A. 08 BAMAKO 00888

[1](#)B. BAMAKO 00106

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: Two election day incidents - one outside of Timbuktu and another north of Gao - focused attention on simmering disputes between northern Mali's ethnic Tuareg and Arab populations. The incident north of Gao in the town of Tarkint is particularly nettlesome as it involves opposing Malian Arab factions, offended Tuaregs, and an enormous influx of cash likely linked to the Canadian and European hostage crisis. Alleging ballot stuffing and intimidation by Telemsi Arab militiamen, Tarkint's Tuareg and Kounta Arab leaders have petitioned judicial officials in Mopti to nullify the election results. Armed Arab militiamen who materialized in Tarkint on election day reportedly included key AQIM kidnapping suspects Asultan ould Badi and Alassane ould Mohamed (aka Cheibani). On May 3 National Assembly Deputy and Idnane Tuareg leader Ibrahim ag Mohamed Asselah told the Embassy he was prepared to lead fellow Idnane Tuaregs to "war" against Telemsi Arab populations if the Mopti court failed to fully enforce electoral laws. Asselah said he had already telephoned rogue Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga in Libya and the remnants of his followers in northern Mali to attempt to line up their support should the Mopti court decision not go Asselah's way. Although northern Mali's Kounta and Telemsi communities are both of Arab origin, conflict between the two is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the proximity of Arab militias, disgruntled Tuareg rebels, and newly affluent Arab AQIM intermediaries. The Mopti court is expected to render a decision on the Tarkint election results within two weeks. End Summary.

Tuaregs vs. Berabiche in Ber

2.(SBU) As results from Mali's April 26 local elections continue to trickle in, so too do reports of election day incidents between ethnic Arabs and ethnic Tuareg in the northern towns of Ber and Tarkint. In Ber, which is located approximately 60 KM due east of Timbuktu, a scuffle between Berabiche Arabs and Tuaregs inside a polling station left two Tuaregs with minor stab wounds. The altercation reportedly began when polling officials prevented Berabiche who were registered in Timbuktu from voting instead in Ber. Security forces arrested one individual who was later released. Both stabbing victims remained hospitalized as of May 4.

Tensions in Tarkint

3.(C) More worrisome were events on election day in Tarkint, 175 KM north of Gao, where Idnane Tuareg and Kounta Arab leaders are aligned against Telemsi Arabs. As negotiations for the liberation of two Canadian diplomats captured by AQIM accelerated, Tarkint emerged as one of the liberation effort's epicenters. The timing of the Canadians' liberation, less than a week before Mali's April 26 local elections, may not have been a complete coincidence given that many of the actors who stood to benefit materially from the crisis' resolution were also running for election. This includes the Mayor of Tarkint-Almoustrat, Baba ould Chouiekh; former National Assembly Deputy Mohamed ould Mataly; and current National Assembly Deputy Ibrahim ag Mohamed Asselah who won ould Mataly's Assembly seat during the 2007 legislative elections, leaving Mali's Arab community without any national level elected officials given that there are no ethnic Arabs in the 147 seat National Assembly or the 75 seat High Council of Collectivities.

4.(C) In 2008 Asselah criss-crossed northern Mali, ostensibly at the behest of State Security (DGSE) director Col. Mamy Coulibaly, to increase local pressures on AQIM to release the two Austrian tourists captured in Tunisia in February 2008 (Ref. A). He undertook a similar mission, also at Col. Coulibaly's direction, in late February and early March 2009 to ferret out information on AQIM's two Canadian hostages (Ref. B). Upon his return to Bamako in mid-March, an evidently shaken Asselah told the Embassy that inter-community relations in Tarkint had deteriorated to such an extent that Tarkint's three main ethnic communities -

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Idnane Tuaregs, Kounta Arabs, and Telemsi Arabs - were each running their own ethnic based list of candidates for the upcoming local elections. Asselah attributed this deterioration to discord over the presence of AQIM and the role of primarily Telemsi Arab militias created by the Malian government.

5.(C) On May 3 Asselah told the Embassy that a contingent of armed Telemsi Arab militiamen under the command of Malian Col. Abderahmane ould Meydou descended on Tarkint with 15 vehicles on election day. Asselah said what resulted "was not an election," and accused the militiamen and the civilian politicians who benefited from their presence - meaning ould Chouiekh and ould Mataly - of bullying the local population, intimidating poll workers, and corrupting the electoral process. Asselah alleged outright ballot box stuffing and the destruction of at least two ballot boxes.

6.(C) Asselah also spotted several Arab bandits linked to the AQIM kidnappings among the Arab militiamen in Tarkint on election day. After seeing Asutlan ould Badi and Cheibani in a vehicle driven by Hanoun ould Ali - who happens to be the son in law of Malian Minister of Culture Mohamed el Moctar - Asselah telephoned DGSE Director Coulibaly. According to Asselah, Col. Coulibaly asked why Asselah didn't arrest Asutlan. Asselah said he asked Col. Coulibaly why he hadn't arrested Asutlan himself, then hung up. Asselah reported that ould Ali was now in Bamako, and speculated that perhaps Cheibani had returned to Bamako as well.

7.(C) Aggrieved Idnane Tuareg and Kounta Arab leaders have filed a protest with election officials and are seeking to disqualify results from several polling stations in Tarkint. The ultimate legal decision rests with the Administrative Court in Mopti. There is no mechanism for appeal. Asselah warned that if the Mopti court failed to apply electoral laws as he believes they should, he was ready to lead fellow Tuaregs to "war" against Telemsi Arabs. To back this up, Asselah said he had already spoken by telephone to rogue Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga, who remains in Libya, and to some of Bahanga's rebel allies in northern Mali. Asselah described the situation in Tarkint as a "ticking time

bomb".

8.(U) An anonymous source quoted in a May 4 report of the incident published by the local newspaper Le Hoggar accused Ould Ali of intimidating voters, forcing them to vote for Ould Mataly, and ordering ballot box stuffing. "If our rights are not respected," warned an unnamed individual quoted by Le Hoggar, "I can assure you that the situation will deteriorate and we will resort to arms to protect them."

Comment: Tarkint Tinder-Box

9.(C) Conflicts between Kounta and Telemsi Arabs in Tarkint have occurred before. In 1999 an estimated 33 individuals were killed during three months of Kounta-Telemsi violence. Leaders on the Telemsi side in 1999 were Ould Mataly and Col. Ould Meydou. A July 1999 peace agreement negotiated by the Malian government and local leaders required Ould Meydou to return one pickup truck to the Tarkint gendarme base, two trucks to security forces in Gao, and repay CFA 16.5 million (USD 33,000) in pilfered government funds. Ould Mataly was also required to return 4 barrels of diesel fuel, one radio, one hunting rifle, 500 sheep, 70 camels, 111 cartons of Marlboro cigarettes, another Toyota pickup, and another CFA 310,000 to their rightful owners. The 1999 agreement required Col. Ould Meydou to return to his barracks with the regular Malian army. Col. Ould Meydou returned several months later, but deserted again in 2004.

10.(C) The involvement of Idnane Tuaregs on the Kounta side, Asselah's evident willingness to call in Tuareg rebel heavy hitters like Bahanga, Baba Ould Chouiekh and other Telemsi leaders' newfound affluence following the liberation of the Canadian hostages, and Col. Ould Meydou's empowerment as a Tuareg rebel buster and government sanctioned Arab militia leader make a rather combustible combination. Bahanga is unlikely to return to Mali simply because Asselah would like him to. Some of Bahanga's followers whose post-rebellion landings were not as soft as their Chief's exile in Libya, however, may be game to exact some revenge against roaming Arab militias supported by the Malian government. Whether

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any elements of this mixture actually ignite may hinge on the Administrative Court in Mopti.

11.(SBU) We intend to inform the Malian Ministries of Justice and Territorial Administration that we are closely following the handful of court cases, to include serious allegations of fraud emanating from Tarkint in the region of Gao, that frequently arise after highly contested elections, and expect that each dispute will be resolved in accordance with Malian law.

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